

Responsibility: Enabling Human Consciousness and Flourishing Using Paradox Theory

Jun Kabigting

This paper argues the role of responsibility as a unifying condition, akin to Aristotle's *phronesis* or master virtue, to keep human consciousness from atrophying and in the process help achieve individual, institutional, and global flourishing and well-being. Specifically, the paper proposes the use of paradox theory and the paradoxical mindset in finding the balance or optimum combination among the three fundamental conditions human consciousness needs to flourish in everyday life: freedom, hope, and flow. The paper uses an old concept such as paradox to find a new way of application to the second wave of the science of positive psychology or existential positive psychology (PP 2.0). The use of paradoxical mindset can help advance PP2.0's ultimate goal of optimal human functioning, flourishing, and well-being through the recognition and harnessing of the dialectic nature and tendencies of people, organizations, and society. The paper ends with some suggestions (i.e., structural equation models or SEMs) to guide future researchers to further the research and inquiry into this proposed construct.

Responsibility: Enabling Human Consciousness and Flourishing Using Paradox Theory

Consciousness refers to the information that people have of their experiences across different modalities such as temporal (past, present, and future), spatial (me versus them), affective groupings (good and bad), cognitive (true or false), etc. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Csikszentmihalyi proposed three fundamental conditions human consciousness needs to flourish

Academia Letters, April 2021

©2021 by the author — Open Access — Distributed under CC BY 4.0

Corresponding Author: Jun Kabigting, florencio.kabigting@cgu.edu

Citation: Kabigting, J. (2021). Responsibility: Enabling Human Consciousness and Flourishing Using Paradox Theory. *Academia Letters*, Article 368. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL368>.

in everyday life, to wit: Freedom (to decide what consciousness means), Hope (the positive outlook of the future), and Flow (enjoyable experiences). He argued that keeping human consciousness from atrophying needs to be a concern of governments and their people to prevent their communities from suffering, decline, and death.

However, are the conditions proposed above enough to indeed keep human consciousness from atrophying? Could a unifying condition akin to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* or master virtue (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006) be the answer to keep the marriage of these primary conditions healthy and robust? Wong (2019) posited Responsibility as the master virtue making all other virtues identified in the Values in Action (VIA) classification system possible (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Hence, in this paper, I likewise propose Responsibility as the fourth condition of human consciousness operationalized through the lens of paradox theory that can enable human and societal flourishing.

Responsibility: Uniting the Conditions of Human Consciousness

In this paper, Responsibility (or sense of responsibility) refers to the obligation to satisfactorily perform a task (McGrath & Whitty, 2018) whether on an individual, organizational, societal, or governmental levels of operationalization. Responsibility is different from accountability as the latter refers to the liability for ensuring a task is satisfactorily done (McGrath & Whitty, 2018). That is, a person may have the responsibility to do something (e.g., Enola Gay pilots who dropped atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II upon lawful orders of the then US President and Commander-in-Chief) but may not necessarily be held accountable (e.g., President Delano Franklin Roosevelt had the ultimate accountability for this action). In the context of this paper, the scope of responsibility primarily covers attributional or operational domains (e.g., tasks, functions, jobs, etc.) rather than that of the moral, ethical, or legal aspects of responsibility. In short, there is an assumption in this paper that when an action is done responsibly, it is something good, moral, ethical, and legal.

To enable Responsibility become a unifying condition amongst Freedom, Hope, and Flow as visually shown in Figure 1, a brief discussion about the concepts of paradox and paradox theory follows next.

Paradox, Paradox Theory, and Applications

Smith and Lewis (2011) defined paradox as statements or elements that have seemingly contradictory nature or meaning but exist simultaneously and persist over time. Paradox theory is further conceptualized as a meta-theoretical framework that provides insights into the sources,

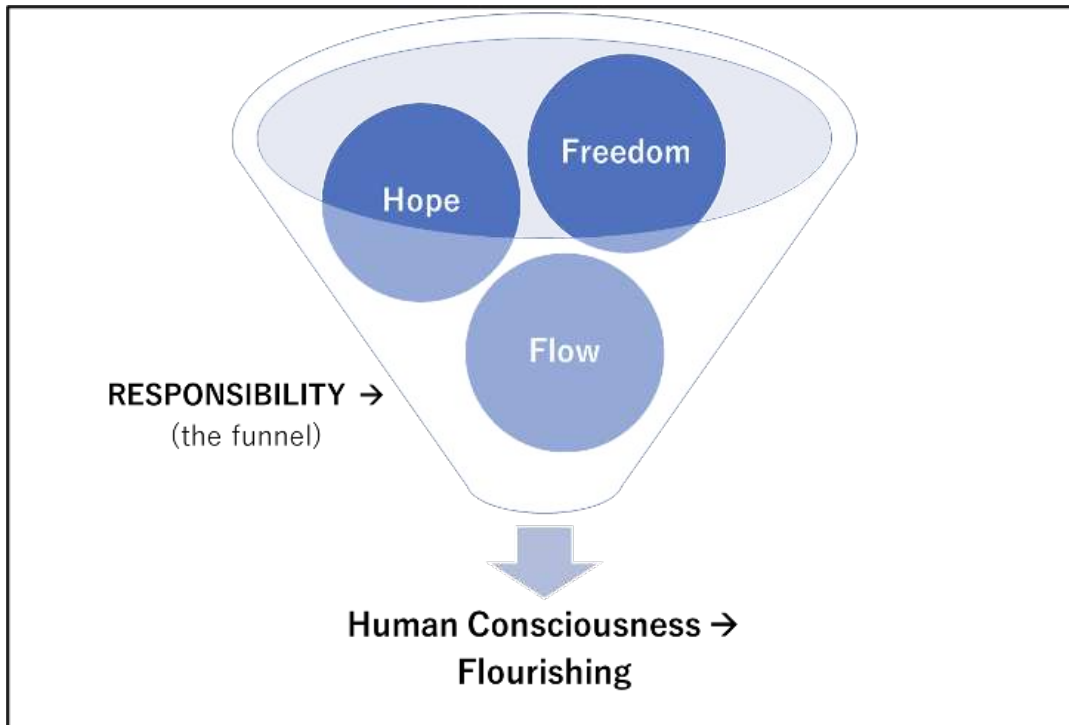


Figure 1 Responsibility as Enabler of Human Consciousness for Flourishing. In this model, Responsibility unites the conditions of Freedom, Hope, and Flow to enable human consciousness to flourish.

nature, and outcomes of individual and organizational differences (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These differences inevitably result to paradoxical tensions which can be viewed as a dilemma or a trade-off, a compromise or dialectic (Western form or Hegelian dialectic), or as a paradox, which affects the kind of decision goal one has to take to resolve the tension (see Figure 2; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

In the case of tension viewed as a dilemma (e.g., make or buy), the decision making requires weighing advantages and disadvantages for each option; the decision goal is to make a tradeoff, selecting the option that maximizes the advantages and limits the liabilities. When tension is viewed as a compromise, contradictory elements (i.e., thesis and antithesis) are resolved through synthesis or integration of both options. However, when tensions are viewed as a paradox by using the contrasting elements together instead of choosing one over the other, it results in a broader range of behavioral options people can choose to make informed decisions. In short, a paradoxical view of tensions adopts an “and/both” approach (Smith &

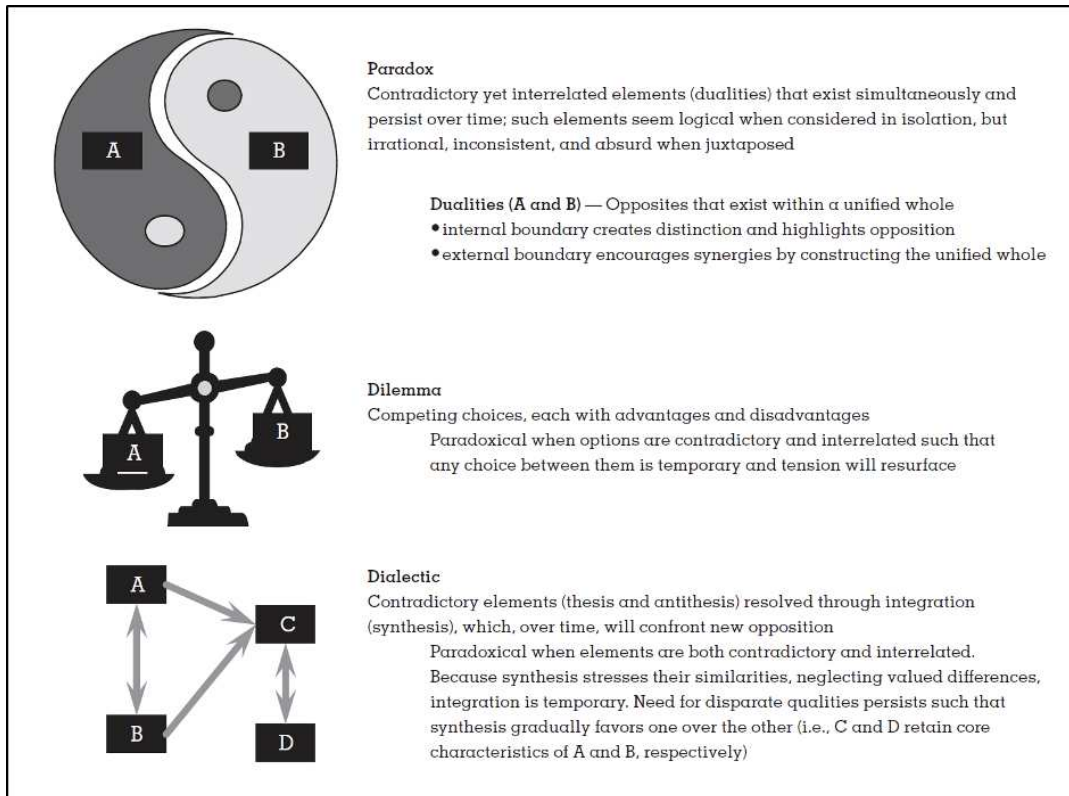


Figure 2 Ways of Distinguishing Organizational Tensions. Adapted from Smith and Lewis (2011).

Lewis, 2011) instead of “either/or” or “if/then” approach to contingency theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967).

In the field of management sciences, paradox theory has been applied in the areas of leadership and leadership development such as ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2012; Farrell, 2018), strategy development and strategic agility (Lewis et al., 2014), paradoxical leadership and competing values framework (Lavine, 2014), paradoxical leadership behavior (Zhang et al., 2015), and creativity and innovation (Shao et al., 2019) to name a few. With such widespread use of the concepts of paradox theory, this paper proposes the application of paradox theory in finding the balance or optimum combination among the fundamental conditions of human consciousness needed to flourish in everyday life.

Operationalizing Responsibility

Using paradox theory in operationalizing how responsibility can become a unifying condition to keep human consciousness from atrophying, we juxtapose Responsibility with Freedom, Hope, and Flow as shown in Figure 3. Notice that in each paradox dyad, four quadrants are formed representing four possible scenarios, outcomes, or behaviors that may result depending on the level or degree of the conditions in the x- and y-axes (i.e., low-low, low-high, high-low, and high-high).

For example, in the *Freedom-Responsibility* dyad, a person with low levels of freedom and responsibility would experience stagnation, atrophy, or dependence on someone else and for a person with a high degree of freedom but a low level of responsibility, this person may become independent of others but may also result to entitlement, chaos, or potential abuse of freedom. Conversely, if a person has a low degree of freedom but a high level of responsibility, rebellion, disobedience, unrest, slavery, exploitation, and co-dependence on someone else may result; but, when a person has high levels on both freedom and responsibility, amazement, interdependence, thriving or flourishing happens.

The same process of analysis can be replicated for the *Hope-Responsibility* and *Flow-Responsibility* dyads. These analyses clearly show the power of paradox theory in providing a broader set of outcomes or behaviors that people and governments can become aware of so that they, in turn, can explore appropriate interventions to prevent these conditions of human consciousness from atrophying.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although the concepts of responsibility, freedom, hope, enjoyment (flow), and paradox are not novel by themselves, the relationships, interactions or connections amongst these conditions when combined and operationalized together are worth further investigating by conducting more empirical studies and scientific inquiry. As an example, research on the role of Responsibility in mediating, moderating, or both the three other conditions of Freedom, Hope, and Flow would advance our understanding of this proposed construct.

Figure 4 shows two structural equation models (SEM) that researchers can investigate to gain a deeper understanding of how these conditions relate to each other and in the end, provide people and governments the right “mix and match” of these conditions that enable human consciousness to flourish. SEM 1 represents a moderated-mediation model where Responsibility (moderated by Paradoxical mindset) mediates Freedom, Hope, and Flow on a moderated level to enable human consciousness that leads to flourishing.

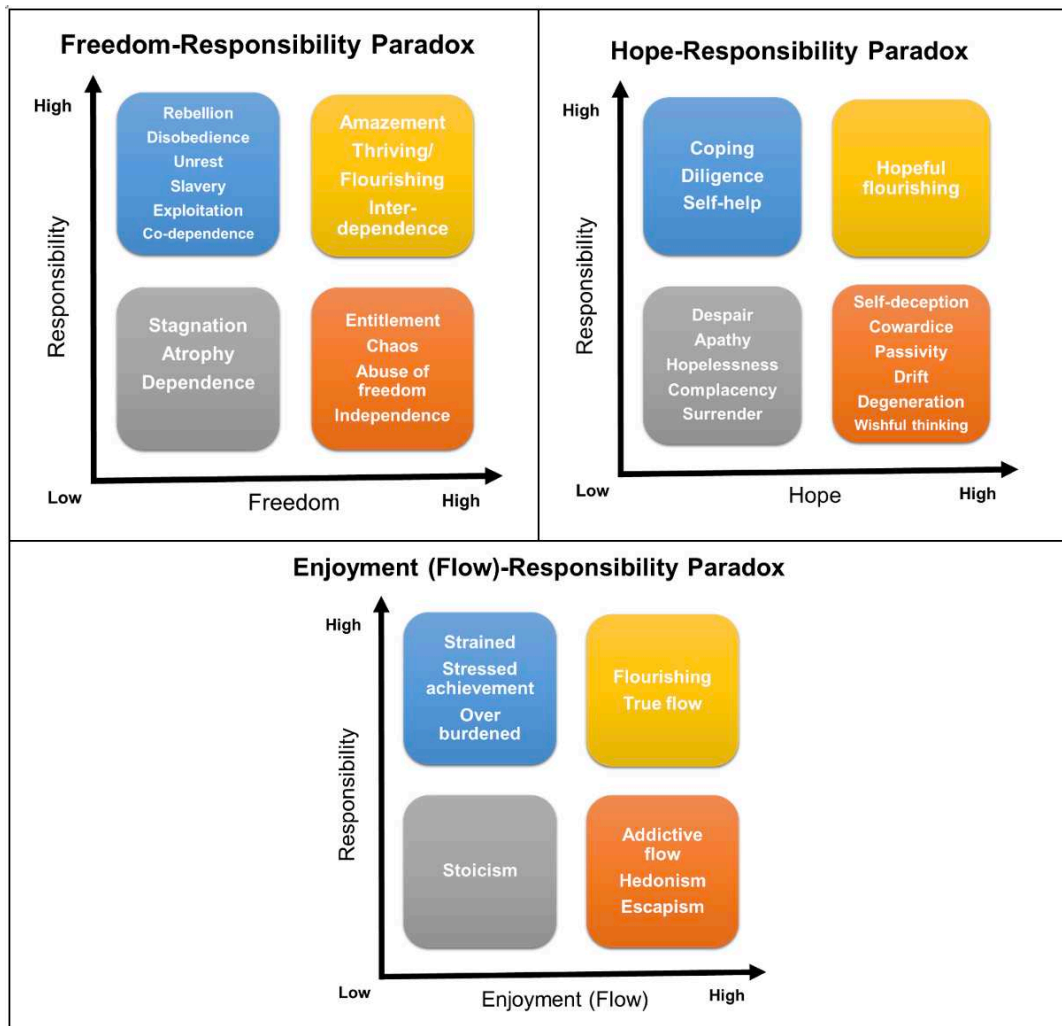


Figure 3 Responsibility as Enabler of Human Consciousness for Flourishing. Paradoxical dyads in operationalizing Responsibility with conditions of human consciousness to enable flourishing.

On the other hand, SEM 2 presents a simultaneous mediator-moderator model where Responsibility (moderated by Paradoxical mindset) simultaneously mediates and moderates Freedom, Hope, and Flow to enable human consciousness that leads to flourishing.

Regardless of the outcome of the proposed studies, both models further conceptually demonstrate how paradox theory can be used in enabling the flourishing of human consciousness through a unifying condition that is Responsibility.

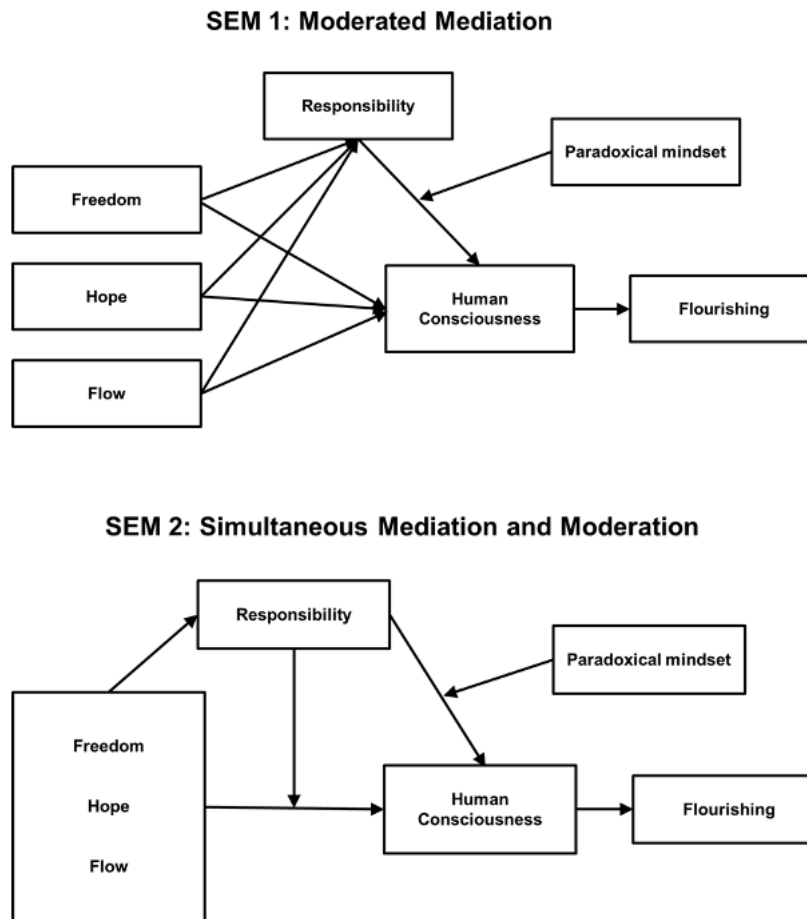


Figure 4 Structural Equation Models (SEM) for Responsibility and Human Consciousness. Proposed models in investigating the role of Responsibility in unifying the conditions of human consciousness using paradoxical mindset to enable flourishing.

References

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). The politics of consciousness. In T. J. Hämmäläinen & J. Michaelson (Eds.), *Well-being and beyond* (pp. 271-282). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing
- Farell, M. (2018). Leadership reflections: Leadership paradoxes. *Journal of Library Administration*, 58:2, 166-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1412712>

- Lavine, M. (2014). Paradoxical leadership and the competing values framework. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2014(1), 14098-14098. <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2014.14098abstract>
- Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). Differentiation and integration in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12(1), 1–47.
- Lek, H. (2021, February 7). What is Responsibility? *Philosophy Now: A magazine of ideas* (56). Accessed at https://philosophynow.org/issues/56/What_is_Responsibility.
- Lewis, M., Andriopoulos, C., & Smith, W. (2014). Paradoxical leadership to enable strategic agility. *California Management Review*, 56(3), 58-77.
- McGrath, S., & Whitty, J. (2018). Accountability and responsibility defined. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*. 11. <https://www.doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-06-2017-0058>.
- Oxford Dictionary (2021, February 7). Paradox. In Lexico.com dictionary. Retrieved at <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/paradox>.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rosing, K., Frese, M., & Bausch, A. (2011). Explaining the heterogeneity of the leadership innovation relationship: Ambidextrous leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 22(5), 956–974.
- Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. (2006). Practical wisdom: Aristotle meets positive psychology. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 377-395.
- Shao, Y., Nijstad, B., & Tauber, S. (2019). Creativity under workload pressure and integrative complexity: The double-edged sword of paradoxical leadership (in press). *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.01.008>
- Smith, W. & Lewis, M. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium of organizing. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 381-403.
- Smith, W. & Lewis, M. (2012). Leadership skills for managing paradoxes. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 227-231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01435.x>.
- Wong, P. (2019, June 16). Meetup Lesson 2: Responsibility as the master virtue and the foundation for wellbeing. PowerPoint slides presented at the *Meaningful Living Group*

Second Meetup for 2019, North York, ON. Retrieved from [https://www.dropbox.com/s/xr4a03ywdsrn6pj/Meetup Lesson 2019 Lesson 2 Responsibility as the master virtue 20190612.pptx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/xr4a03ywdsrn6pj/Meetup%20Lesson%202019%20Lesson%202%20Responsibility%20as%20the%20master%20virtue%2020190612.pptx?dl=0).

Zhang, Y., Waldman, D., Han, Y., & Li, X. (2015). Paradoxical leader behaviors in people management: Antecedents and consequences. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(2), 538-566. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0995>.